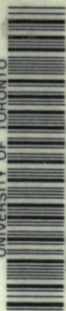


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Note on the Objects of the
Toronto Guild of Civic Art
and on the Exhibition of
Prints of Mural Paintings
with condensed Catalogue

James Mavor

TORONTO: ROWSELL & HUTCHISON
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THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
BY

James Brebner, Esq.



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NOTE ON THE OBJECTS OF THE
TORONTO GUILD OF CIVIC ART
AND ON THE EXHIBITION OF
PRINTS OF MURAL
PAINTINGS.

THE Toronto Guild of Civic Art has been founded upon the model of similar associations in New York and elsewhere. Its two chief purposes are, first, to promote and encourage the production of works of art intended for the embellishment of the city or for its public buildings; and, second, to provide an organization for a discriminating selection of these.

Encouragement of art has come to assume considerable prominence among the functions of the modern municipality. Few cities, indeed, are without a memorial of some important figure or event in national or civic history which is also intended to be an object of interest from the point of view of art. The selection of these memorials has, however, not always been happy, and thus they are often lacking in artistic interest. No doubt the most impartial and expert of experts may make a blunder, but the impartial expert has had, as a rule, little to do with the selection of designs for public memorials in the modern city, whether in Europe or in America.

Yet, especially during the few past years, public taste has been greatly educated. This

has been accomplished in the first place by the increased number of persons who have received in some degree artistic training, and in the second place by the extension of appreciation produced by the knowledge of artistic movements to be derived from magazines and from exhibitions of pictures. This extension of appreciation is also, no doubt, aided by travel, although in art as otherwise the extent of a traveller's excursions depends upon the extent of his resources.

The effect of all this upon the selection of public monuments has not been fully felt because, with respectful acknowledgment of his many valuable qualities, the civic ruler is not in general elected on account of his capacity to estimate the relative merits of designs in painting, sculpture or the like, but on other grounds, and thus the selection of designs has been done everywhere, more or less, by haphazard. Even Paris is studded with gigantic and costly blunders, the result of unintelligent and misdirected national and municipal encouragement of art.

The Guild of Civic Art, while not arrogating to itself the position of a Court of Art, does attempt to provide the machinery by means of which, as occasion arises, a consultative committee might be formed which would aid the public authorities in arriving at a decision upon designs which may be submitted to them. The Guild also may be able from time to time to suggest the adoption of measures for the beautification of the city or of its buildings.

Thus, under as competent guidance as in each case it may be found possible to procure, the Guild might expect to be led to choose those designs which might most appropriately and worthily be

carried out for the enrichment of the city, and thus be enabled to render an important service to the civic authorities and to the citizens.

Such service can be effectively rendered by the Guild only if it is strongly supported by public opinion and by public confidence. Its membership is open to all who have an interest in art and who are anxious to extend and to render more intelligent the knowledge of it. While the membership is thus open, the Executive Committee of the Guild is composed partly of artists and partly of laymen.

Among the methods of embellishing public buildings by way, on the one hand, of expressing public magnificence, and on the other of stimulating the appreciation of art, mural painting has, during the few past years, taken perhaps the most prominent place. In Paris, the Government, the University, the Municipality and other public authorities have recently given to the Pantheon, to the New Sorbonne and to other public buildings, mural paintings which have been epoch making in the history of art. The elementary schools in Paris have even been enriched with works of the same kind. In Edinburgh for some years a similar movement has been going on, by means of which, for example, University Hall and St. Mary's Song School have been endowed with notable decorations by Scottish artists. More recently the fashion has crossed the Atlantic, and the Public Library at Boston, the Congressional Library at Washington, the Walker Art Building at Bowdoin College, the Astoria, Manhattan and Plaza Hotels in New York as well as several banks and private houses have been decorated with mural paintings by French and American artists.

The exhibition of The Copley Prints now being held in the rooms of the Ontario Society of Artists, has been promoted with the object of indicating how other cities have encouraged art by acquiring for their public places great mural decorations which may afford their citizens free enjoyment for some generations to come. The exhibition also discloses how the intelligently directed efforts of a few public bodies in the United States have called into existence a school of decorative painting and have given at once opportunity and fame to a number of artists whose works must otherwise have been seen by the public only at infrequent intervals in exhibitions.

A few general observations may be of service to the non-technical visitor to the exhibition.

Mural painting no doubt originally meant painting on the wall. In the dry climate of Egypt, and even in that of Italy, paintings upon wood, stone, or plaster, executed many centuries ago, have in some cases suffered little from the ravages of time, and have even retained much of their original quality. But in the moister climate of Northern Europe, mural painting of this sort (fresco properly) has not been found to endure. It is possible that, in the relatively dry climate of cities in the interior of the American continent fresco painting would last perfectly well; but the development of mural painting has proceeded on other lines. The humid atmosphere of Paris has rendered some other method than fresco necessary. The method now chiefly adopted obviates direct contact between the design and the wall. Decorations are painted upon canvas in oil colour with a mixture of beeswax and turpentine, or of gum-elemi and spike oil. The

whole surface of the wall to be covered with the decoration is spread with a layer of white lead, oil and rosin, and the canvas is firmly pressed against this layer. In course of time the mass becomes as hard as stone and has the great advantage of resisting the action of moisture upon the colour, while in case of need the canvas might even without irreparable injury perhaps be removed from the wall. The masters in mural painting at present, for instance, Puvis de Chavannes, some of whose works are represented by prints, consider that the characteristic features of mural painting should be the presence of broad, flat colour masses, that the drawing should be decisive, and the composition simple, while the design should be absolutely a part of the architecture of the building. Others have held less severe and restrained views of the extent to which a decoration may challenge the eye, as it were, on its own account.

As to the choice of subject, the fashion until recently almost universal of regarding the human figure as the sole fit subject for mural painting was due, according to Mr. Ford Madox Brown, to the influence of the modern Italians. The French masters, on the other hand, have employed landscape largely, although they have almost invariably introduced figures. The Americans, La Farge, Sargent and Abbey, for example, have been slower to throw off the Italian influence, and in many of their decorations have eschewed landscape wholly. In the case of some of the finest works of the latter artist, the picture (not a decoration) of "Pavanne," for example, the influence of the Italians is most conspicuous.

The controversy as to the propriety of employing landscape as a subject for decorative treat-

ment need not detain us. The gist of the matter seems to lie rather in the disposition of line, in the massing of colour, and in the filling of the space to be decorated than in the choice of a particular field of subject material. This concession may, however, have to be made to the non-artistic observer, that the decoration should have some interest by way of association to the average person who is likely to see it. If, however, a story is to be told by means of a decoration, it is clearly better that it should be told to many than to few. Thus the story, if any, should be very simple and obvious, and on that account, perhaps, the most interesting decorations, from the point of view of art, may also be the most widely interesting from the point of view of association. A laboured attempt to illustrate a recondite allusion or to express in paint that which is probably not susceptible on any terms of being so expressed, is apt to miss its point so far as concerns the average observer, while the story which is so simply told on canvas as to be intelligible to a child may also be the most interesting to the cultivated intelligence.

Some of the mural painters are by no means content with appealing to the interests of the artist, the child, or the rural visitor, but they aspire as well to impress the dilettante with a series of enigmas on paint.

When all is said, however, mural painting has unusual advantages in the possibilities it affords of imaginative impressions, and even of symbolic representation within reasonable limits. The scale upon which the work is done is grandiose, and the conditions under which the work is to be seen induce a grandiose style. The paintings placed as they are where the public must see

them, will ultimately form the visible substance of the immortality of the artist. The inducements to produce *tours de force* are sometimes too strong to be resisted, and especially in the infancy of mural painting in America these inducements are likely to overpower the feeling of restraint which the more matured art of Puvis de Chavannes, for example, successfully exercises.

A most conspicuous advantage possessed by mural painting is to be found in the necessary condition of the work. If it is not actually produced in the place which it is to occupy, as is the case with fresco, it must at least be produced for the place. The decoration to be successful must meet the conditions of lighting, etc., which the position of it affords. It ought, therefore, always be seen to advantage, unlike a picture which, tossed about from one wall to another, or from one gallery to another, probably is never seen in the position which the artist intended it should occupy.

This condition of placing leads to the observation that mural painting is not to be looked upon as a mere embellishment of a building; but ought rather to be regarded as an integral part of it, designed as a portion of its architectural detail and as necessary as any other portion to make the building a unity. This, of course, is another way of saying that art is not a mere addition to life, but a part of it, and that the intelligent cultivation of it is as necessary as the intelligent cultivation of any other function of individual or social well-being.

A nation or a city loses much in possible vitality which does not cherish its artists and encourage them by discriminating appreciation and appropriate opportunity.

A specific lesson may, perhaps, be drawn from chapter of civic history elsewhere. About ten years ago, the city of Glasgow built a municipal palace by the side of which our own civic buildings might go not unworthily. The designs of that building included suites of rooms elaborately panelled in rare woods, alabaster staircases and other costly items upon which the workmanship was the least, while the material was the greatest part of the cost. These rarities were brought from the ends of the earth at great expense and for no other reason than that they were expensive, for they certainly were not beautiful. Ten years ago also a small band of artists were struggling in Glasgow against public neglect. Had the civic authorities had intelligence and foresight enough they could have had the Town Hall filled with mural paintings at a cost trifling compared with their alabaster staircases, by artists whose works are now as eagerly bought at St. Louis as at Munich, and who have made the name of the Glasgow School famous all over the world. Had they done so they would have compelled lovers of art to make pilgrimages to Glasgow to see the mural paintings as they do to the town halls of Germany, Italy, and Belgium.

The opportunity which Glasgow failed to embrace is actually now at hand for Toronto. There is a civic building, and there are the artists, many of them no whit less competent, though at present less known, than those of the Glasgow School.

CONDENSED CATALOGUE OF PRINTS.

Congressional Library at Washington.

—The series of reproductions of the decorations in the Congressional Library at Washington includes the following :—

“The Evolution of the Book,” by John W. Alexander. This decoration consists of six tympanums. (1) The Cairn (represented). (2) Oral Tradition. (3) Egypt (in Hieroglyphics). (4) Picture Writing (represented). (5) The Manuscript Book. (6) The Printing Press (represented).

“The Graces,” by F. W. Benson. (1) Aglaia. (2) Thalia (represented). (3) Euphrosyne.

“The Seasons,” by F. W. Benson. (1) Spring. (2) Summer. (3) Autumn. (4) Winter (all represented).

“The Progress of Civilization,” by Edwin H. Blashfield. This series forms the main decoration of the dome of the library. It represents the twelve countries which have contributed most to the development of civilization. Egypt, Judea, Greece, Rome, Islam, Italy, Germany, Spain, England, France and America. (Represented in four prints.)

“The Human Understanding,” by E. H. Blashfield (represented). The portion of the above decoration which occupies the ceiling of the lantern of the dome. “A seated figure is represented looking upward from finite intellectual achievements (typified in the circle of figures beneath) to the Higher Wisdom which is beyond.”

“The Arts,” by Kenyon Cox. A tympanum. On a central throne, Poetry ; right and left, Architecture, Music, Sculpture and Painting (represented).

"The Sciences," by Kenyon Cox. A tympanum. Astronomy in the centre, Botany, Geology, Physics, Mathematics, Zoology, etc.

"Peace," and "War," by Carl Melchers.

Representing one, an early religious procession, the other the return of a primitive chieftain from victory.

"The Family," by Charles Sprague Pearce. (1) Religion (represented). (2) Labour (represented). (3) Study (represented). (4) Recreation (represented). (5) Rest.

"The Senses," by Robert Reid. (1) Taste. (2) Sight. (3) Smell (represented). (4) Hearing (represented). (5) Touch (represented).

"The Muses," by Edward Simmons. Nine tympanum decorations. (1) Melpomene. (2) Clio (represented). (3) Thalia. (4) Euterpe (represented). (5) Terpsichore (represented). (6) Erato. (7) Polyhymnia (represented). (8) Urania (represented). (9) Calliope (represented).

"Government," by Elihu Vedder. (1) Government (represented). (2) Corrupt Legislation (represented). (3) Anarchy. (4) Good Administration. (5) Peace and Prosperity.

"Minerva," by Elihu Vedder. From "Peace and Prosperity," in above decoration.

"Lyric Poetry," by H. O. Walker. Seven tympanum decorations. (1) Lyric Poetry with figures, Pathos, Truth, Devotion, Passion, Beauty and Mirth. (2) Ganymede. (3) Adonis. (4) Comus. (5) Endymion. (6) Uriel. (7) The Boy of Winander (all represented).

Boston Public Library.—The Grand Staircase Hall of the Boston Public Library has been decorated with a series of mural paintings by Puvis de Chavannes, the artist whose decorations in the New Sorbonne and in the Pantheon have made him famous. The chief painting by this artist in the Boston Library is

"The Muses Welcoming the Genius of Enlightenment" (represented). This decoration occupies one wall of a long corridor, and opposite to it is a series of eight panels: (1) Astronomy. (2) Chemistry. (3) Dramatic Poetry. (4) Epic Poetry. (5) History. (6) Pastoral Poetry. (7) Philosophy. (8) Physics (all represented).

The other decorations in the Boston Library have been executed by two American artists, John S. Sargent, A.R.A., and Edwin A. Abbey.

"The Triumph of Religion," by John S. Sargent (represented). These decorations are intended to illustrate the chief stages in the religious history of the Jews and of Christendom. The subject of the portions already executed is the struggle between Monotheism and Polytheism.

"Astarte," by John S. Sargent (represented). A detail of the foregoing decoration.

"Frieze of the Prophets," by John S. Sargent. This frieze is perhaps the most impressive of the decorations in the library. It carries out the idea of the scheme by connecting the religious history with the vivid personalities of the prophets.

"Hosea," by John S. Sargent (represented). A detail of the foregoing.

"The Quest of the Holy Grail," by Edwin A. Abbey. The mural paintings illustrating the story form a long frieze, five panels of which have been executed. (1) The Vision (represented). (2) The Oath of Knighthood (represented). (3) The Round Table. (4) The Departure (represented). (5) The Castle of the Grail (represented).

Trinity Church, Boston.—Among the earliest mural decorations in America were the paintings executed by John La Farge for Trinity Church, Boston:—

"Christ and Nicodemus" (represented).
"Isaiah" (represented).
"Suonatore," by J. La Farge, design for a memorial window in Trinity Church (represented).

Miscellaneous Mural Paintings, represented by Reproductions :—

Lawyers' Club, New York :

"Justice," by Edwin H. Blashfield.

Criminal Courts, New York :

"Justice," by Edward Simmons.

"The Fates," by Edward Simmons.

Mr. C. P. Huntingdon's House, New York :

"Terpsichore," by Edwin H. Blashfield.

Walker Art Buildings, Bowdoin College :

"Colour," by Elihu Vedder.

A detail of mural decoration, "Rome."

Astoria Hotel, New York :

"The Months" and "The Seasons," by Edward Simmons.

In addition to the reproductions of mural paintings a number of reproductions of pictures by J. MacNeil Whistler, Daubigny, Troyon, Vedder and others are shown in one of the rooms. There are also photographs of notable pieces of sculpture by American artists.

"The Shaw Memorial," by Augustus St. Gaudens ; and "Bacchante," by Frederick Macmonnies.

The thanks of the Guild are due to Messrs. Curtis & Cameron of Boston for their kindness in granting the loan of the series of Copley Prints. The particulars of the decorations given above have been compiled from their catalogue.



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